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Chairman: Ms. AL-HAMAMI (Yemen)
(Vice-Chairman)

later: Mr. KUKAN (Slovakia)
(Chairman)

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In the absence of Mr. Kukan (Slovakia), Ms. Al-Hamami (Yemen), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 113: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (continued) (A/48/12 and Add.1, 64, 91, 134, 181, 184, 207, A/48/294-S/26247, A/48/299-S/26261, A/48/308-S/26295, 391 and 444)

1. Mr. BULL (Liberia) said that his country was very concerned about the rapid increase in the number of refugees throughout the world and stressed the need for a firm commitment on the part of States to the functioning of democratic institutions based on the rule of law in order to promote fundamental human rights, particularly the right to remain in one's country of origin. His Government commended the three-pronged approach of UNHCR and shared the Commissioner's concern for the safety of staff who might be drawn into conflicts in discharging their functions. The resources placed at the disposal of UNHCR, unfortunately, had not kept pace with the rapid increase in the refugee population. The international community must therefore provide the Office with the financial and material support that it required.

2. Although the refugee problem was world wide, the African continent was the most affected region. That alarming situation placed additional strains on the already meagre resources of African States, particularly countries of asylum. The international community must pay as much attention to the refugee situation in Africa as to that in other regions.

3. Since 1989, Liberia had undergone a nightmarish existence marked by considerable loss of innocent lives and wanton destruction of the country's infrastructure. Under the terms of the Cotonou Agreement, signed in July 1993, a transitional council of State had been formed to administer Liberia's affairs until the holding of legislative and presidential elections, which were to take place seven months after the opposing forces were disarmed. His Government was committed to strict adherence to the Agreement in order to restore peace to the country. Once installed, the transitional government would require extensive assistance to respond to the country's needs. His delegation appealed to the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to help the people of Liberia during the transition period. The transitional government faced the awesome tasks of repatriation, resettlement and rehabilitation. His delegation welcomed the continuing commitment of UNHCR to alleviate the plight of Liberian refugees and commended the efforts of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the specialized agencies collaborating with UNHCR in that regard. Lastly, he expressed his delegation's sincerest appreciation to neighbouring African countries for the caring hospitality given to Liberian refugees.

4. Mr. RODRIGO (Sri Lanka) said that, while a rigid separation of the political and humanitarian facets of the refugee problem might not be helpful in dealing with high-intensity conflicts, failure to distinguish between them could be fraught with danger in low-intensity conflicts fuelled by terrorist violence. A comprehensive partnership at governmental, intergovernmental and

(Mr. Rodrigo, Sri Lanka)

non-governmental levels was required to address the root causes of human displacement.

5. A wave of ethnic secessionist terrorism had erupted in Sri Lanka in 1983, leading to loss of life, property and an unprecedented displacement of its citizens both internally and externally. With the gradual easing of the violence, the Government had in 1987 undertaken a partnership with UNHCR which had proved invaluable in restoring normal conditions. Large numbers of persons who had fled violence in northern and eastern Sri Lanka had required assistance. Approximately 600,000 persons had been displaced within Sri Lanka as a result of conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had sought to establish a mono-ethnic secessionist entity.

6. As a result of cooperation between Sri Lanka, UNHCR and India, 37,000 Sri Lankans who had fled to India in the wake of the events of 1983 had voluntarily returned to Sri Lanka. Cooperation between Sri Lanka and UNHCR had also led to the development of UNHCR open Relief Centres that provided shelter for thousands of displaced persons. Sri Lanka was grateful to UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and individual Governments and organizations for their support. His Government had also established, with the cooperation of UNHCR and contributor Governments, a unified assistance scheme for the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. Its implementation together with the improved security situation in the eastern province had enabled the Government and UNHCR to work out details to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankans from Europe.

7. His Government had always endeavoured to discharge its obligations to all Sri Lankans, especially concerning their enjoyment of fundamental human rights. In that connection, it had requested UNHCR to use its good offices to negotiate with LTTE in order to open a safe passage to enable civilians to move in and out of the Jaffna peninsula. Those negotiations had failed because of the intransigence of LTTE. His Government would, however, continue to provide those currently displaced with at least their basic requirements while it sought a political solution.

8. Mr. DEKANY (Hungary) said that reluctant or late international responses must be taken into consideration in assessing the refugee problem. UNHCR could perform its mandate only if its actions were backed by a solid international consensus. Hungary supported the three-pronged strategy of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and concurred that prevention was the best approach. Safeguarding human rights was in turn the best means of prevention, since asylum offered by another State could not replace the protection citizens were entitled to expect from their own Governments. His delegation supported the efforts of UNHCR to forge a comprehensive, integrated strategy linking humanitarian action and protection of human rights with preventive diplomacy, peace-keeping and peace-building. High priority should be accorded to the development of protection strategies that would entail preventive action and monitoring in countries of origin and would abide by the basic principles of protection and human rights, as well as by humanitarian law.

9. Massive migratory movements had threatened the fundamental principles of refugee protection, including asylum and non-refoulement. Those rights must

(Mr. Dekany, Hungary)

continue to be upheld, and that process inevitably laid a heavy burden on countries of first asylum. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, previously transit areas, were increasingly fitting into that category. Although the granting of temporary asylum was a pragmatic means of tackling massive refugee crises, such an approach must be accompanied by a search for durable solutions. Hungary agreed that the preferred durable solution was voluntary repatriation: reintegration, the promotion of sustainable self-reliance, an international presence to monitor the safety of returnees, and respect for human rights should remain the essential components of such a policy. The recent successes of UNHCR in organizing voluntary repatriation should not, however, divert attention from the alarming dimensions of the current refugee crisis.

10. As a neighbour of the former Yugoslavia, Hungary had been among the first countries to feel the consequences of the tragic events there. It had provided shelter to almost 70,000 persons, mostly of non-Hungarian origin. Approximately 40,000 de facto refugees from Romania, mostly ethnic Hungarians, had begun to be integrated into Hungarian society. Despite the grim political realities of the current world scene, Hungary remained committed to the voluntary repatriation of refugees, and was endeavouring to erect a legislative and institutional framework which would permit the lifting of its territorial reservation to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

11. Mr. CRAPATUREANU (Romania) noted that, as stated in the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (A/48/12), the flow of refugees and asylum-seekers was at its highest level since the Second World War, and Eastern Europe was increasingly becoming a transit and asylum region. Furthermore, a misuse of the right of asylum, as defined by the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, had jeopardized the institution of asylum itself: clearer distinctions needed to be drawn between refugees and other categories of migrants and asylum-seekers. Any decision taken with regard to Eastern Europe should factor in the difficult transition period it was undergoing, and the tens of thousands of refugees with whom the countries of that region had to cope.

12. Romania had traditionally been a source of, not a destination for, refugees and asylum-seekers and its domestic legislation had consequently made no provision for such persons. After 1990, however, mounting numbers of migrants seeking refugee status, as well as a wave of migration to Romania, and through Romania to Western Europe, had prompted the Government to begin the process of instituting a new legal and institutional framework. A new draft law on the status of refugees, which conformed with the relevant international instruments and with the Constitution, had been submitted to Parliament. An interministerial body had been created to ensure a coordinated approach to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, in 1991 Romania had acceded to the 1951 Convention and to its 1967 Protocol and offices of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had been opened in Bucharest. The Romanian authorities had also signed bilateral repatriation agreements with Austria, Hungary and Germany and were undertaking similar negotiations with Poland, Sweden and Switzerland. Romania was committed to actively contributing to international cooperation with regard to migration issues, which must take into account the national interests of all States. Furthermore, it acknowledged its juridical responsibility for Romanian nationals on foreign soil and was working towards their repatriation.

(Mr. Crapatureanu, Romania)

13. In 1991 there had been some 30,000 foreign citizens on Romanian territory, mainly from Asia and Africa, but by the end of 1992, some 18,000 more had entered with temporary visas and had stayed beyond their dates of expiration. Many of them had chosen Romania as a country of first asylum; it was also recognized as a safe country for asylum-seekers transiting to other countries of destination. during 1991 and 1992, great numbers of Albanians, even those without refugee status, had received humanitarian assistance; with the financial aid of IOM, many had later been repatriated. The Somali refugees who had come to Romania in 1990 had been accorded temporary refugee status on humanitarian grounds, until repatriation or acceptance by other States. Lastly, Romania pledged its assistance in helping to solve the global refugee crisis.

14. Mr. RAMISHVILI (Russian Federation) said that the problem of refugees had also affected his country, where the influx of refugees had been enormous. Increased instability, inter-ethnic disputes and hotbeds of tension in newly independent States neighbouring Russia had resulted in uncontrolled movements of people fleeing violence and persecution. His country was currently giving refuge to more than 2 million citizens of the former Soviet Union who had previously lived outside the borders of the Russian Federation. In addition, more than 200,000 people from traditional countries of exodus were now in Russian territory and at least half of them might apply for refugee status.

15. In 1992 the Russian Federation had acceded to the 1951 Convention and in 1993 had adopted legislation on refugees and displaced persons, established a federal migration service and developed cooperation with UNHCR and other relevant international organizations. His country had to overcome considerable difficulties in ensuring respect for the rights of refugees in accordance with international standards. That task exceeded his country's current capability because of the extremely serious situation facing it. It had become clear that the refugee crisis in the Russian Federation was the result of events taking place in a number of States and that its problems were an integral part of the global refugee problem. The masses of refugees and displaced persons streaming into Russia would inevitably overflow its borders. The Russian Federation had thus become both a receiving country and a country of exodus.

16. The world-wide refugee crisis required extraordinary organizational measures aimed at finding long-term solutions. The convening of a diplomatic conference to develop innovative approaches might be the best practical action to take. Such a conference would be extremely timely and could give new impetus to the work of UNHCR, which within the framework of its mandate and resources, was not in a position to coordinate the activities of States aimed at solving new problems in that area.

17. A conference on the problems of refugees, displaced persons and migrants could elaborate international measures to prevent massive population movements as a result of human-rights violations and lack of basic conditions to ensure a safe existence. In that connection, a High Commissioner for Human Rights could coordinate activities with the High Commissioner for Refugees, who dealt with the consequences of human-rights violations that led to refugee flows. The role of regional mechanisms, which could promote cooperation between States in that regard, should also be substantially increased.

(Mr. Ramishvili, Russian Federation)

18. Such a conference could also consider the question of joint measures to prevent illegal migration, including alien smuggling, as well as approaches to other forms of migration. The conference would also be of vital importance in view of the disquieting fact that certain countries with high living standards were introducing measures to restrict admission of asylum-seekers. His delegation therefore proposed that the General Assembly, at its current session, should adopt a decision to invite all States and the relevant United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to express their views on the convening of such a conference, and to request the Secretary-General to submit a report at the forty-ninth session on the replies submitted. He hoped that his delegation's initiative would be widely supported in view of the pressing nature of the problem.

19. Mr. RATA (New Zealand) said that New Zealand condemned attacks against UNHCR staff and was working with other Member States for the adoption of new international measures which would make it a crime to attack United Nations personnel. Cooperation between UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies must be strengthened in order to address the "refugee continuum" - prevention, protection, assistance and development. the importance of that continuum had been implicitly recognized by the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993. Nowhere was the need for such cooperation clearer than in the former Yugoslavia. The international community must support the work of the humanitarian agencies there not only in material terms but also by promoting reconciliation and a lasting political settlement. It was also vital to strengthen the financial and administrative infrastructure of UNHCR in order to enable it to bear its heavier load and to provide enhanced accountability and transparency.

20. The voluntary return of refugees in safety and dignity remained a priority. In that connection, he welcomed the repatriation of Cambodian refugees and refugees elsewhere in Asia under the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese Refugees. In some circumstances, however, resettlement might be the only option for a durable solution. His country would continue to receive refugees for resettlement and to cooperate with UNHCR in focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable refugees such as women and disabled persons. It was only through the increased support of the international community that UNHCR would be able to undertake its task.

21. Mr. TESSEMA (Ethiopia) said that the transitional government of Ethiopia had taken serious measures to address the root causes of refugee flows and to seek solutions in line with the fundamental freedoms of all people. The legacy inherited from the brutal dictatorship continued to inflict immense suffering on the Ethiopian people. Hundreds of thousands of farmers had been uprooted by the previous regime under its villagization and resettlement policy. During 1993, some 57,000 farmers had returned to their homes through the concerted efforts of his Government and United Nations agencies. Other projects for the repatriation and rehabilitation of over 250,000 Ethiopians from Somalia and another 91,500 from Kenya awaited international assistance. Though adequate assistance had not been secured for the voluntary repatriation and rehabilitation of tens of thousands of Ethiopians from the Sudan, the Government had begun efforts towards that end with the limited resources available. Ethiopia was also host to hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees.

(Mr. Tessema, Ethiopia)

22. The international community must appreciate the scope and magnitude of the problems when considering assistance requirements. Ethiopia had demonstrated its political will and commitment to address the root causes of refugee flows and find solutions. Despite its commitment to avert war and famine compounded by years of political repression, it could not by any means cater to the needs of all refugees on its territory. It was a formidable task that could not be accomplished by any single Government or agency; a concerted international response spearheaded by UNHCR and relevant organizations was crucial to the repatriation and rehabilitation of Ethiopian refugees. He hoped, in that regard, that the donor community would continue to fulfil its obligations so as to achieve humanitarian objectives which had always been the essence of international cooperation in times of humanitarian crisis.

23. Mr. NASSIROV (Azerbaijan) noted that UNHCR was leading humanitarian efforts to assist refugees and displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia, Africa and Asia. In recent years, UNHCR had made important progress in developing a strategy by focusing not only on voluntary repatriation and resettlement but also on the need to eliminate the causes of mass exoduses.

24. The issue of refugees and displaced persons was increasingly linked to the international political situation and, in many instances, was a direct result of armed conflicts and foreign occupation. The international community should concentrate on tackling the causes of conflicts and at guaranteeing respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of States and non-interference in their internal affairs.

25. As international humanitarian actions became increasingly linked to United Nations efforts to resolve conflicts, there was a growing need for close cooperation between the political and humanitarian bodies. It was unfortunate that a lack of concerted action to resolve international and regional conflicts had led to an increasing number of humanitarian problems, particularly in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, owing to the failure of the world community and relevant international organizations to react quickly and adequately to foreign aggression and occupation, the number of refugees and displaced persons had sharply increased to a staggering total of 1,150,000. In the previous three months alone, the number of displaced persons had increased by 300,000 as new regions had been seized.

26. That had placed a severe burden on the economy and on the Government. In that regard, his Government was deeply grateful to the Governments and the people of a number of States and also to UNHCR and other international organizations for their invaluable assistance. Given the dire straits of hundreds of thousands of individuals at the onset of winter, he appealed to delegations to support the draft resolution on emergency aid to Azerbaijani refugees and displaced persons. The problem of refugees and displaced persons and the causes of their flight could only be resolved through the concerted efforts of international organizations and of the entire international community.

27. Mr. BASNYAT (Nepal) said that the major challenge facing the international community was how to prevent new waves of refugees in different parts of the world. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference

(Mr. Basnyat, Nepal)

on Human Rights had emphasized the need to solve that problem through such means as the strengthening of emergency preparedness and response mechanisms. UNHCR and other international and non-governmental organizations had done highly commendable work to try to find durable solutions to the refugee problem, the magnitude of which went beyond the mandate of any single organization.

28. Nepal had been shouldering the burden of over 100,000 refugees whose influx had aggravated the country's environmental, social and economic problems; it was therefore grateful to UNHCR for its assistance. Nepal strongly believed in the right of refugees to return to their country safely and welcomed the offer of UNHCR to help in finding a durable solution. In the light of the current refugee situation, there was a need for a strong UNHCR that was well equipped to discharge its increasing responsibilities.

29. Mr. Kukan (Slovakia) took the Chair.

30. Mr. AHMED (India) observed that the total number of refugees in the world today had reached nearly 19 million, while approximately 24 million people had been displaced as a result of violence of various kinds. People were fleeing from a lack of security engendered by violent conflicts, human rights violations and economic deprivation. In order to contain the problem, it was essential to restore peace and security and enforce acceptable standards of human rights. Determined efforts to address economic disparity were needed to stem the flow of economic refugees. The principle of voluntary repatriation was a durable solution and should be strictly upheld.

31. The critical situation in the area of the former Yugoslavia was of great concern to his delegation. Hundreds of thousands of former Yugoslav citizens had been displaced owing to the tragic conflict and the abominable practice of "ethnic cleansing". Despite recent positive developments among the three communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina horrendous crimes were again being perpetrated against the civilian population. His delegation condemned such heinous acts and hoped that the three communities would return to the negotiating table. India supported the efforts to find a negotiated political settlement.

32. The UNHCR report (A/48/12 and Add.1) had shown that resources were desperately needed to tackle the refugee situation in different parts of the world. His Government had been working with UNHCR to find ways and means to return refugees in India to their homeland. It hoped that the international community would fulfil its moral duty and make the necessary resources available to UNHCR to enable it to deal with the problem of the world's refugees.

33. Mr. CHIREH (Djibouti) noted that UNHCR was currently providing assistance to the 19 million refugees and 24 million displaced persons in the world. His delegation supported the High Commissioner's efforts and asked that the UNHCR should allocate additional resources for the 6 million refugees and 15 million displaced persons in Africa.

34. Djibouti had been affected by the serious deterioration of the situation in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia. Thousands of refugees had been

(Mr. Chireh, Djibouti)

placed in a number of camps set up by his Government with UNHCR assistance. The living conditions were deplorable, owing to a lack of infrastructure and humanitarian assistance.

35. The situation of the women and children who had fled to the capital and were living in total deprivation with no outside assistance was even worse. His Government was making efforts to transfer them to camps outside the capital but many were returning to the capital owing to the lack of facilities. The burden of that large number of refugees had put pressure on the already limited resources and precarious socio-economic infrastructure, and jeopardized the economic and social development of the country. The security of the country and the stability of the subregion were in danger unless the international community dealt with the incessant influx of refugees, the conditions in the refugee camps in Djibouti and the transfer of refugees from the capital to the camps.

36. The relevant United Nations bodies, in particular UNHCR and the World Food Programme, together with the international community's support, should urgently establish refugee camps inside Somalia and provide essential needs in order to discourage those displaced from leaving their homeland. His Government was requesting the United Nations and its relevant agencies to find a way to provide adequate humanitarian aid and additional resources for refugees in camps in Djibouti. The existence of thousands of homeless refugees in the capital required the assistance of UNHCR. They should be registered and transferred to camps managed by UNHCR within Djibouti and, if possible, beyond its borders.

37. Despite the efforts of the international community and of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, hundreds of thousands of people had died as a result of internal conflicts in Somalia. His delegation commended the efforts of the United Nations bodies and the non-governmental organizations which had been engaged in heroic efforts in Somalia for some time. It urged donor countries to respond promptly to the appeal launched in March 1993 for humanitarian assistance to Somalia, thereby enabling the United Nations to carry out reconstruction and help to consolidate peace in that country.

38. Mr. ISSA (Egypt) said that the grave challenge posed by the increasing world refugee population reflected the need to adapt policies with a view to implementing UNHCR's three-pronged strategy of prevention, preparedness and solutions. Careful coordination among existing mechanisms and maximum use of their potential would enhance preventive measures taken by the United Nations and achieve an integrated approach encompassing humanitarian action, the protection of human rights, peacemaking and peace-keeping. His delegation therefore welcomed the strengthening of cooperation between the Office of the High Commissioner and United Nations bodies to monitor and contain human rights problems in order to avert potential flows of refugees. In that context, he emphasized the importance of increased cooperation between UNHCR and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs to provide preventive assistance to displaced persons.

39. The concept of the refugee and those in need of protection as defined in international instruments should be re-examined with guidance from other relevant instruments with an eye to a less rigid definition that allowed priority to be given to the provision of relief, humanitarian assistance and

(Mr. Issa, Egypt)

protection, as well as to preventive action aimed at reducing possible causes of exodus. His delegation therefore welcomed the support expressed by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme for moves in that direction. None the less, while commending UNHCR accomplishments in addressing the world's refugee problems, he stressed that permanent solutions would only be found through a comprehensive approach to the humanitarian, economic and political dimensions of those problems. Finally, he reiterated Egypt's committed support for the efforts of UNHCR and all other organizations working in the same field.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.